DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 849 CS 203 804

AUTHOR Hairston, Maxine C.
TITLE Teaching Sentences Without Using Traditional Terminology.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Composition Skills (Literary); *English Instruction; *Grammar; Higher Education; Sentence Combining; *Sentences; *Sentence Structure

ABSTRACT

Teaching students the traditional terminology for sentences is unnecessary and provides them little or no help in improving their writing. This paper outlines the most common difficulties in students' sentences and describes a simplified working vocabulary for teaching students how to solve their sentence problems. The paper shows the methods and terminology devised for teaching students how to choose different kinds of sentences for different purposes, how to use complex or compound sentences to show relationships between ideas, how to combine sentences for economy and clarity, and how to overcome the problem of writing sentence fragments. (GW)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED147849

Teaching Sentences Without Using Traditional Terminology

Maxine C. Hairston

The University of Texas

at Austin

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maxine C. Hairston

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

Copyrighted by

Maxine Hairston

1977

CS203 BOX

Teaching Sentences Without Using Traditional Terminology

Last summer when I faced the task of writing a chapter on sentences for the second edition of my freshman composition text, I found myself almost as paralyzed as the most insecure student. I had been worrying about the task for months, and I knew that the basic block I faced was deciding how to talk about sentences without using the usual traditional terminology. I didn't think I could teach students anything about writing better sentences by talking about loose or cumulative or periodic sentences.

For one thing, I've never been very comfortable with the traditional terms myself, because I have never in my life set out consciously to write either a cumulative or periodic sentence. Thus I was not and am not convinced that having students identify and then imitate such models is going to do a thing to help them to express their ideas in a more coherent fashion.

From the beginning, then, I realized that I was going to have to discard conventional labels. I decided instead to try to decide what students' chief problems with sentences were and to figure out what terms I would absolutely have to use in order to talk about those problems. My instinct was to keep all technical terminology to an absolute minimum since I have found out the hard way that students cannot--or will not--master the technical jargon that we teachers tend to lapse into when we are talking about writing. I think the reasons for their indifference are plain. Students find out very early--perhaps in the seventh or eighth grade--that not knowing the difference between a gerund and an appositive or a predicate complement makes absolutely no difference in their lives. At one time they were exposed to such knowledge, but they've long since forgotten it.

Not that they will admit their ignorance. They sit in class or conference looking attentive and muttering "Yes, sir," or "Yes, ma'am," while we rattle on in the specialized language of our profession, but they're not impressed. They're right, of course. Most successful professional writers can't tell you the difference between a verbal and a noun phrase, but many grammar teachers who can identify everything that is happening in a sentence can't put together a decent paragraph.

Still we do have to have a working vocabulary with which to talk to students about ways to solve their sentence problems in the same way that a mechanic has to have a working vocabulary in order to talk to customers about what is wrong with their cars, or a cook has to identify basic culinary processes for his or her students if they are going to learn to follow a recipe. But what are those basic terms in grammar? I didn't know, but I decided the best way to identify them would be to pinpoint the most common difficulties that seemed to crop up in my students' sentences and then make a list of the technical terms they would have to master in order to understand, discuss, and remedy those difficulties.

The major problems seemed to be these:

1. Students write long, tangled, confused sentences that are hard to follow because the writer is trying to do too much, and has not really decided ahead of time what the content or purpose of the sentence should be.

2. Students write groups of short choppy sentences that don't fit together well and which repeat the same idea unnecessarily.

3. Students write sentences that express more than one idea, but they put the parts of the sentence together in such a haphazard way that the relationship between the ideas is not clear.

4. Students write ineffective and unintentional sentence fragments.

For the first problem of correcting tangled and confused sentences one scarcely needs specialized terms. The terms "vigor," "concreteness," and "economy" that we use to talk about good writing in general will do. For the second problem of getting rid of short choppy sentences and repetition, I think one needs only two terms: modifier and transition. For the third problem of confusion about the relation of the parts of the sentence, I think one needs to identify three kinds of sentences--simple, complex, and compound--and two kinds of clauses, dependent and independent. For the fourth problem of sentence fragments, one may need to introduce the term "fragment," but one may not either; more about that in a few minutes.

So in my opinion, one can reduce the essential working vocabulary for teaching sentences to seven fairly simple terms. They are these:

dependent clause
independent clause
modifier
transition
simple sentence
complex sentence
compound sentence

The term "parallelism" is probably useful, but perhaps not essential. Other terms that will prove useful and probably necessary in teaching sentences are "combine," "join," "condense," "expand," or "simplify," but even in a grammatical context the meanings of such terms are fairly obvious and shouldn't be difficult for anyone to grasp. Of course, one also has to be sure that students understand such basic terminology as "subject" and "verb" but these would have to be learned in any case.

What it seems to me more important for students to learn than any number of grammatical labels is a basic concept: that is, sentences are the containers in which we package our

thoughts in order to deliver them to people; as such, they are our primary means of communication. We have a remarkable variety of packages available to us, and with a little practice and trial and error we can learn to select the kind of package that will be the most efficient and attractive container for the ideas we want to present. Also, the packages can be changed. If we get our ideas done up in certain ways and then, upon examining them, don't like the effect, we can open up the packages, combine the contents of some of them, rearrange others, add new material or take out superfluous terms until we are satisfied with the end product.

The metaphor is an imperfect one, of course, but its simplicity and its familiarity make it a useful tool for getting students to start thinking about the many options that are available to them for constructing sentences. And from my point of view, the most important thing about the metaphor is that it allows one to stress a key point from the very beginning: the content of the sentence is always more important than the way it is written. No amount of decoration or fancy wrapping on a package will make up for shoddy content. Better a solid idea in a plain brown wrapper than a cliché or trivial observation in an ornate and intricate multi-tiered package.

Building on this, one can proceed with a rhetorical approach. The rule of thumb is simple: you choose the kind of sentence that provides the best package for the particular job you want to do. For instance, if you want to make a strong, unqualified assertion or a straight, uncomplicated statement of fact, a simple sentence is the best choice. Subject, verb, and completing phrase or word is all one needs. For example, "Our energy policy is ineffective," or "The Supreme Court ordered schools desegrated in 1954." Such bare-boned, plain sentences work especially well when a writer or speaker wants to make an emphatic opening statement to a broad, heterogeneous audience; they are the basis of forceful,

clean prose.

If the occasion demands, of course, one can increase the amount of information in a simple sentence by splitting it at one of the natural junctures and inserting modifiers, rather like enlarging a garment by splitting a seam and adding material. Such insertions do not change the basic design. An example would be changing "Las Vegas is a national tourist attraction," to "Las Vegas, gambling center of the United States, is a national tourist attraction." I see no reason for a student to know that what he has added is an appositive; the term "modifier" or "a phrase that gives more information" will do just as well.

Students do need some of this kind of practice that shows them how to get more information into a simple sentence for the sake of economy; that is, they should realize that a plain package can also be an efficient, tightly packed one. But they also need to know that trying to compress too much into one package will distract the reader's attention from the principal item. Thus when they want to make direct and important statements, particularly at the beginning or end of a paper, they should learn to avoid stuffing in extra adjectives or modifying phrases that will weaken their writing. After all, one can hardly improve on such statements as "War is hell," or "No man is an island."

On the other hand, when a writer wants to present ideas that are more involved, he or she needs to learn how to use complex or compound sentence structures to show relationships. I don't believe it is necessary to make a major point of distinguishing between complex and compound because if you think about it, you will realize that many compound sentences can be rearranged into complex ones with only a little word juggling, and vice versa. So it is better not to get one's self out on a limb with declarations about complex sentences doing one thing and compound sentences doing another. The important point is that one must use a sentence with at least two clauses in order to show relationships between ideas,

and at least one of those clauses will have to be an independent one.

I think the most important thing students need to learn about working with complex/compound sentences is that they must think about the kinds of relationships they want to show between the ideas they are expressing. Their failure to do so seems to me one of the chief stumbling blocks to their writing clearly. It helps if they are made to realize that the relationships between ideas usually fall into one of four categories--consequence, qualification, similarity, and contrast--and that there are groups of specific terms they can use as joining devices to construct the multi-compartmented packages that they need. For example, terms like "because," "therefore," "as a result of" and "since" express consequence; words like "although," "but," "in spite of," and "if " show qualification; "moreover," "and," and "besides" are the kind of words that express similarity (or parallelism, if you like); "on the other hand," "conversely," and many of the same words used to express qualification can be used to show contrast. You can label such words "transitions" or "relationship signals" or "links" but I do think that students need to know a definite term for such key functional terms.

The metaphor of a sentence as a package for ideas seems especially useful when teaching compound/complex sentences. With this analogy you can show the student that he or she may not want to use two separate simple sentences to express two ideas because the content of one is so crucially related to that of the other that to package them individually would be confusing. You might make the comparison of buying the parts for an assemble-it-yourself kitchen cupboard packaged in separate cartons. The do-it-yourselfer who cannot see immediately how the contents of the two containers are supposed to go together is going to be confused and annoyed. For example, suppose a writer puts these two sentences next to each other in a paragraph.

Most people believe that the young person who wants to make much money must have a college education.

Author Carolyn Bird claims that most college educations are a waste of time.

The person reading these sentences in sequence is going to say, "Well, what's the point? Which way is this writer arguing?" If he considers the sentences separately, he will be as bad off as the amateur carpenter trying to assemble the cabinet if he or she doesn't know whether the big rectangle of wood contained in one package is the bottom, top, or back for the side pieces contained in the other box. Thus both the sentences and the cabinet parts need to be packed together in one container, and labeled in such a way that no confusion is possible. But you should also stress that there are a number of possible ways the parts can go together, and different combinations will produce different effects.

Showing students how to combine sentences for economy and smoothness as well as for clarity is also important, but again, I think it can be done without talking about embedding or transforming or mentioning T-units or nominals. Again, one can use the metaphor of packaging to make the point about efficiency and attractiveness. Here, for example, is a representative sequence of clear and correct, but poorly packaged sentences that a fairly good student might put together.

Carmel is a unique town. It has no tall buildings. There are no large shopping centers. Almost everything is sold in speciality stores. There seems to exist a shop for every kind of product. Many stores are not visible from the streets. Some are hidden down alleys and behind fences.

How much time an instructor would want to spend on showing students what could be done by combining sentences like these--and certainly there's a lot of potential there--

depends on one's priorities. Your students might have other problems so severe that a paragraph like this would seem like an oasis of good writing. But it is a shame for students who write this well not to realize that they have inefficiently packaged a potentially interesting description into a string of little isolated units that could be combined into two or three smooth and economical sentences. Some sentences could become modifiers, others could be merged or collapsed into complex units that would show relationships. And an instructor would have a fine opportunity to stress the number of options open to a writer by showing how many kinds of effective packages could be used to contain such a paragraph.

Once more, though, a caution is in order. We have to be careful not to encourage students to practice sentence combining for its own sake. Just because a complicated sentence is "mature," in Chomsky's sense of the word, doesn't mean it is good, but to students who have heard too much of that kind of specialized terminology, such confusion is understandable.

Finally, what terms, if any, do we need to deal with the old problem of sentence fragments? The label itself is probably not strange to students--some English teacher somewhere has drummed it into their heads that fragments are Bad Things. But here we may need to get rid of professional terminology precisely because students are too familiar with it. They have, in theory at least, so long accepted the taboo against sentence fragments that it no longer occurs to them to ask us to define the forbidden practice or explain just why it is forbidden. Moreover, those students who are sophisticated about language see the taboo for what it is: a rigid ban still held sacred by a few fanatics with neither prestige nor money, but broken constantly and with impunity by a great many people who are doing quite well for themselves writing for newspapers, magazines, and advertising agencies.

For these reasons, I think we should drop the term "sentence fragment" and cope with the problem it represents by using some other language. That problem, it seems to me, comes from two sources: first, students' carelessness about or indifference to showing the relationship between ideas, and, second, their inability to hear the pitch and stress in what they're writing. Thus they write, "Communication is a major problem. Parents' forgetting what they were like 20 years ago." Or they write something like this: "Many people do not realize smoking is dangerous. No matter how often they have been told."

In each of these cases, in my opinion, the student's chief error is that he has written a group of words that, taken by itself, leaves the reader in suspense. I label it the "dropping just one shoe" effect. Sentence fragments that work, on the other hand, do not leave the reader in suspense; they give a complete effect. Getting the students to recognize the difference between the two kinds of word groups seems to me the crux of coping with what we have traditionally seen as the dilemma of sentence fragments. Notice that in each case, the student would probably have caught the error if he or she had read his writing aloud. Also, practice in sentence combining would help students to avoid such errors.

Perhaps, then, this is one area in which we need a new grammatical term to replace the old one that we can no longer explain to students or use to criticize their prose. That term would be "suspense phrase." It is self-explanatory, and I think it would work. I don't know for sure yet, because this insight about the fragment problem is a new one, but I'm going to try it next semester. I'm pretty sure that I will get better results than I ever have with the old terminology.

It's hard to change, of course. Unfortunately, it's easier for us to use the professional technical terms that we have operated with for so long we can scarcely believe we can get along without them than it is to find layman's terms to talk about language. And because

we are comfortable with our terminology, we convince ourselves that students need to know it so we can talk to them about composition. But I think we should ask ourselves if we are really improving people's writing by teaching them terminology. In most cases I don't think we are. Rather we are encouraging them to substitute attaching labels for thinking about how language works. And the incident that convinced me we need even fewer than I had thought was having my husband ask me what an appositive was when he was reading proof for me on the new chapter on sentences. I decided if he didn't need the term to write and speak forceful prose, neither did my students. I've been pruning to the minimum ever since.